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ERC VALERIE AMOS SPEECH TO REGIONAL PARTNERSHIP MEETING: RESPONDING IN A CHANGING WORLD SHANGHAI, 12 OCTOBER, 2011

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It is a great pleasure to be here today in Shanghai.

The theme of this meeting – Strengthening Disaster Preparedness and Response Capacity – is something we are thinking about very carefully in UN OCHA, and I am very pleased to see so many respected experts in the room around us.

Disaster management professionals from 25 Governments have joined us today; as well as leading authorities on emergency response from throughout the Asia Pacific region.

Thank you again for your kind welcome to this great city, and to our hosts for convening such a timely and important meeting on disaster response.

Our discussions today are essential, not only for our crucial work in the Asia Pacific region, but also for worldwide efforts to develop an effective global response system.

This year has been deeply challenging for many of you here today. We have seen a terrible earthquake and tsunami in Japan, drought and tropical storms in China, floods in India and Pakistan, and the effects of typhoons in the Philippines, Viet Nam, Lao PDR, Cambodia and Thailand - to mention but some.

People worldwide watch with admiration as Asian governments lead the response to these crises, and spare no effort to save lives and restore dignity.

At the same time, in a number of those emergencies, the needs were so great that governments asked for outside assistance, and the UN and other agencies were there to help.

Other regions have also faced emergencies which required our support.

In North Africa and the Middle East, a period of rapid change brought new hope for many. But it also brought conflict and social unrest, which has disrupted the lives of millions. UN humanitarian workers have been asked to deal with displacement, insecurity and the breakdown of social services in many countries.

We saw the birth of a new country in South Sudan - a moment of historic significance, but which also brought major challenges. UN workers have stepped in to help tens of thousands of people cope with insecurity and deprivation.

I recently travelled to Haiti, where we are helping hundreds of thousands of people recover from last year's devastating earthquake, as well as a cholera outbreak, tropical storms and periods of political unrest.

And in the Horn of Africa, a severe drought is threatening the lives and livelihoods of more than 13 million people. 750,000 people are at risk of death in the next four months, in the famine zones of Somalia, if we do not get help to them.

In all these places, and many more, the size and number of humanitarian emergencies is testing our capacity and ability to respond effectively.

We live in a world of climate change, environmental degradation, food shortages, poverty, and urbanisation.

This month, the world's population reached 7 billion people, many of them living in overcrowded urban slums.

The number of people exposed to storms and earthquakes in large cities could double to 1.5 billion by 2050 – many of them in Asia and the Pacific.

The broader political context in which we do our work is also changing.

The relative wealth and power of nations is moving, from west to east, and north to south.

The era when the international humanitarian system was dominated by a few countries and aid agencies from the west is over.

We see a proliferation of donors, aid organisations, technologies and fresh ideas – offering, perhaps for the first time, the prospect of a truly global response system.

But this also puts growing pressure on our ability to coordinate.

We can no longer afford to continue as before. We must evolve, and we must do it together.

Excellencies,

Today's meeting offers an opportunity to exchange ideas, compare best practices, and discuss how to address the challenges which lie ahead.

It will result in a blueprint that will guide how we improve the way in which we work together with you for the next two years.

And it will provide new ideas for humanitarian workers worldwide – sending a clear message that Asia is taking a leading role in the evolution of the humanitarian system.

The people in this room are amongst the most experienced emergency responders in the world.

Last year alone, disasters in Asia and the Pacific affected more than 201 million people.

Eighty-nine per cent of all people affected by emergencies last year lived in Asia. And these crises have increased both in scale and severity over time.

There may not be much we can do to stop many of these events taking place.

But, by working together, we can do more to prepare for them ahead of time, to reduce the human cost when they do happen, and to help rebuild people's lives afterwards.

Governments and people throughout the Asia Pacific region are already taking a leading role in disaster response, both at home and in the region as a whole.

Where they are unable to cope, neighbouring countries and regional organizations are also increasingly ready to assist, forming a second line of response.

Groups such as ASEAN, SAARC and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, have shown a growing readiness to take the lead.

In this system, we, the UN, the international community, form a third tier of response – ready to assist national and regional efforts when asked.

As we develop this way of doing things, we see room to improve coordination at all levels.

We need to forge new and lasting relationships, based on trust and mutual respect, so that we can prepare more effectively, and so that when emergencies happen, we know who to talk to, and what we should do.

In the Asia Pacific region, we have taken many important steps. Since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, great strides have been made in improving disaster preparedness, disaster management and emergency response systems. This forum is a good example of that progress.

But we also recognise that we have some way to go.

In particular, we need to give more support to Asia Pacific regional organizations, whose role will become more important with each year that passes.

UN OCHA has 20 years of experience in disaster management, and stands ready to offer its assistance in this process.

During today's meeting, we will also hear from another group of essential players in the humanitarian field – technology experts.

We must do more to bring on board the energy and vigour of the private sector, especially those who are developing new tools and technologies who can help us in our response.

Mobile communications, mapping tools, real-time analysis, logistics have all made extraordinary advances in recent years, with significant implications for the way we do our work – and how we communicate with the people who need our help.

I look forward to learning more.

Excellencies.

As governments in the Asia Pacific region take an increasing leadership role in response efforts, it is also important that we safeguard and maintain the core principles which guide humanitarian work around the world – impartiality, neutrality and independence.

These are more than a philosophy. They are practical tools, to help us operate in some of the most complex environments – at a time where we face increasing constraints on our ability to act.

I would strongly encourage governments to enshrine these principles in their legal frameworks.

Experience has shown that countries affected by disasters can benefit from a clear legal framework, which can guide the coordination of international humanitarian assistance, and ensure the speedy delivery of aid to those in need.

A Draft Model Act has been developed which can help states address some of the legal and regulatory issues that arise with international assistance during disasters. If requested, the UN, and the International Federation of the Red Cross stand ready to help.

I would also urge the governments and agencies represented here today to play an even greater role in developing the international humanitarian response system.

Over recent years, we have worked extremely hard to build a more coherent and more effective way of doing things – to coordinate hundreds of organisations, to provide people with what they need, where and when they need it.

As you know, after the 2004 tsunami, we developed the cluster system – where aid agencies who work in a specific field, such as food, or public health, share information, establish joint priorities, and make sure there is not duplication of effort or needs unmet.

We also began a series of reforms in a network called the Inter-Agency Standing Committee – a group set up by the General Assembly, which brings together the UN, the Red Cross and NGOs, to work together more effectively; and support national-led relief efforts more coherently.

And we launched a special fund – the Central Emergency Response Fund, or CERF – to ensure money is sent to crisis zones in the essential early days.

That fund has allocated more than US$ 2.2bn to 84 countries and territories over the past five years; helping many millions of people.

None of this has been easy. Participation in this system is voluntary, and we have had to show that the system adds genuine value. But year by year, we have made progress.

We invite you to join with us, not only by raising funds for consolidated UN appeals, but also by providing expertise and practical leadership, and taking a greater part in these reform efforts.

In today's world, no one government, no one agency, no one aid organisation can address crises alone.

If we are to meet this challenge, we must prepare better, find more effective ways to support national response efforts, and do more to address the underlying causes of crisis together.

We must become a single community of responders, united in purpose, whose clear and overriding task is to save lives, and restore livelihoods.

It is a daunting task. But we can do it.

The challenges of our fast-changing world demand no less.

Thank you.